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Title: Educating against all odds: The context and content of social work education in times of national crisis in Greece

Dedotsi, S. and Young, A.

Abstract

Greece is six years into a socio-economic crisis during which oppression has increased as a result of unjust austerity measures. Reflecting on the need for an anti-oppressive practice, a qualitative study of pre-qualifying social work education was carried out in one of the four national Departments of Social Work (subsequently abolished). This paper reports the findings of semi-structured interviews with final year students (n=14) and academic staff members (n=10) on the content and context of social work education in relation to anti-oppressive practice. The study revealed the need for a radical shift in social work education based on the emancipatory values of the profession.

Introduction

The development of ethical and anti-oppressive practitioners has been fundamental to social work education. This is reflected in the educational standards and guidelines of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW¹) (2004) as well as in the recent revision of the international definition of social work (<http://ifsw.org/get-involved/global-definition-of-social-work/>). Within these global standards, there is a clear quest for social change through the development of critical consciousness, as well as challenge and action strategies that build solidarity with the disadvantaged and the oppressed.

The importance of critical consciousness was greatly discussed by Paulo Freire (1970, 1993, 1994), where he used the Portuguese term '*conscientização*'. He defined '*conscientização*' as 'learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality' (1970: 35). This thinking is one of the roots of the anti-oppressive practice emphasis that is common to social work education in a range of countries including the UK, USA and Australia. Although theorists differ in their emphases, the significance of raising social work students' crucial consciousness is a common factor with a consensus on the need to engage in a reflexive and political analysis of oppression and inequalities as well as how this might translate into anti-oppressive praxis (Clifford and Burke, 2005; Dominelli, 2002; Mackay and Woodward, 2010). In implementing this, the aim is not to impose a dogmatic thinking on students (Pugh, 1998), but to engage them in an ongoing process of deconstruction and reconstruction of 'knowledge' as an element of their professional formation that becomes a habit of mind and practice throughout their careers (Kumashiro, 2000; de Montigny, 2011).

However, the context of education may discourage the development of critical consciousness either in the curriculum (for example through non prioritisation of anti-oppressive and social justice concepts), and/or in educational policies and practices (Gray and Gibbons, 2007; Morley, 2008; Spolander et al., 2014). The power relations inherent within *how* institutions such as

¹ These can be accessed on the following link: http://cdn.ifsw.org/assets/ifsw_65044-3.pdf.

universities function and how education operates have been discussed in Foucault's (1980, 1982) analysis of the concept of *discipline*. He described the way in which power and dominant discourses constitute individuals' unconscious learning and adherence to norms enacted through the functions of those institutions. Similarly, Freire (1970, 1993) rejected the view that education is neutral but considered it to be the instrument of domination or transformation. Therefore, he advocated for a libertarian education, a dialogical, problem-posing process, which progresses towards critical consciousness. He described this process as a cycle of continuous deconstruction and reconstruction of knowledge and reality between teachers as teacher-learners and students as learner-teachers (Freire, 1970; Narayan, 2000).

In light of these theoretical frameworks, this research set out to explore the context and content of social work education with regard to the development of anti-oppressive practitioners in Greece. One of the authors most associated with anti-oppressive practice (AOP) is Dominelli, who introduced this term in the 1990s:

'AOP embodies a person centred philosophy; an egalitarian value system concerned with reducing the deleterious effects of structural inequalities upon people's lives; a methodology focusing on both process and outcome; and a way of structuring relationships between individuals that aims to empower users by reducing the negative effects of social hierarchies on their interaction and the work they do together' (Dominelli, 1994: 3).

However, AOP has been defined and debated mostly by British authors, without due consideration of a variety of different socio-cultural contexts (countries). Therefore, there is an important gap within the literature (Rush and Keenan, 2014) as the context will assert an influence both on the application of pre-existing values and practices embodied in an AOP approach (e.g. how might AOP be realised in the specific context of a country and its social work education system?) and arguably on the very definition of AOP (given the insights derived from its application in specific contexts how might AOP's core principles and theoretical underpinning require revision?). First a note on social work education in Greece in order to understand the context of the study.

Social work education in Greece – a background note

An historical and political analysis on the evolution of social work in Greece has been discussed by Ioakimidis (2008, 2011) who revealed that the profession was highly driven by religious influences and individualistic, conservative approaches imported by American academics during the civil war years (1946-1949). Historically, during times of oppression, the profession responded in a conservative even discriminatory way, lacking a political critique and detached from the social and activist movements of the time (Ioakimidis, 2008; Papadaki, 2005; Teloni, 2011a).

In the years of crisis from 2008 onwards, within a context of austerity, deconstruction of the welfare state, rise of fascism and violation of human rights,² a gradual radicalisation and anti-

² It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the social impact of the financial crisis in Greece. For such an analysis please see Asimopoulos (2012), Matsaganis and Leventi (2014), Papadopoulos and Roumpakis (2012).

oppressive stance of social work seems to be occurring in Greece (Dedotsi, Young and Broadhurst, 2016; Ioakimidis and Teloni, 2013). This change is reflected not only in the grassroots initiatives by social workers in the community (for example the community interventions of the Greek branch of Social Work Action Network) but also on the very recent politicisation of the Greek Professional Association of Social Workers (SKLE) by participating in strikes and demonstrations against austerity measures and racism (Teloni and Mantanika, 2015). Whilst these recent responses suggest an anti-oppressive and radical shift within the profession, a more collective and critical approach both in practice and education is still very limited. The structure of the profession within Greek society, thus, has a great significance on whether an anti-oppressive practice is emphasised in social work education or not.

Social work education in Greece requires a 4-year attendance leading to an honours degree, and is currently provided by two Social Work Departments of the Technological Educational Institutes (TEIs³) in Athens and Crete and the Social Administration Department at the University of Thrace (AEI). The differences between the AEIs and TEIs in terms of status, funding and levels of research activity, reflect deepening and entrenched social class divisions. Therefore, the lower social prestige of TEIs leads to them attracting students largely from lower-middle and working class background (Fragkoudaki, 1985; Gouvias, 1998; Ioakimidis, 2008; Papadaki, 2004). Social work students in Greece, the majority of whom, attend TEIs, are, therefore, educated within a system which reproduces inequalities. Moreover, due to the manner in which the admissions' system operates⁴, students may end up attending undergraduate courses - like social work - by accident or compromise rather than it being an actively chosen profession or their first choice of degree (Koukouli, Papadaki and Philalithis, 2008; Papadaki, 2004). However, the inadequacies of Greek higher education extend further than the social division of AEIs and TEIs.

Since higher education does not emerge in a socio-political vacuum, further reforms took place in the last decade, through its modernisation under the neo-liberal agenda of European directions as well as the continuous policy cuts by the state. These included policies that limited the free and public character of higher education and introduced technocratic, managerial and commercial criteria for University evaluation. When it comes to state funding, recent reports (KANEP-GSEE, 2014) reveal a decrease of 10.2%, with overall staffing reduced by 22% (but in TEIs was 34.9%), lack of resources and equipment, inappropriate academic premises, unpaid subscriptions to academic journals, and TEIs attracted only 6.4% of the undergraduate student body in Greece.

Social work education has been significantly affected by such policies. A logic of and justification for low cost education, resulted in Social Work Departments having few permanent

³ The TEIs have lower status and are considerably unprivileged compared to Greek universities (AEIs) resembling the divide between the ex-polytechnics (now referred to as new universities) and the older more elite and longer established universities in UK.

⁴ Current system is based on the high school students' performance on nationwide examinations. For an analysis of this system please see Papadaki (2004).

staff members with the contract (temporary) academics constituting the majority of the academic staff. Yet, a further discriminatory division has developed among permanent and contract academics. Despite their high qualifications and employment contracts (full/part time), they do not have labour security, full national insurance, access to grants for research and conferences as well as the right to participate in the developmental processes of the Department. In addition, they are significantly underpaid⁵ or receive belated payments (once every three or even six months).

Finally, a major reform, occurred in 2013 when the Ministry of Education announced the so called ‘Athena Plan’ (law 4115/13), which introduced closing down or merging of numerous Departments across HEIs in Greece. This plan involved an inadvertent attack to social work education in Greece as one of three national TEI Social Work Departments (at the time) was abolished, the Social Work course at the Democritus University of Thrace was downgraded via the merging of the Department of Social Administration with that of Political Science, whilst the two other TEI Social Work Departments were deemed to be in danger of potential closure due to lack of staff. Justifying the abolition and downgrading of Departments, on the basis of their lack of staff and resources, appears to be unreasonable as they are the victims of a gradual disinvestment by the same institutional and structural policies based on a neo-liberal agenda. Yet, in the light of the wider oppressive policies, which violate human rights and deconstruct social welfare in the years of crisis, the profession seems to be a luxury or perhaps a threat for the Greek state.

The ‘Athena Plan’ provoked resistance by millions of students and academics across Greece, who demonstrated for several weeks demanding the Plan be withdrawn. In addition, SKLE, as well as the board of the European Association of Schools of Social Work (EASSW), wrote official letters of complaint and personally visited the Ministry of Education in November 2014, voicing their concerns about the future of social work education in Greece (EASSW, <http://www.eassw.org/news/article-140/en/welfare-state-in-crisis-challenges-and-prospects-for-social-work.html>). However, the ‘Athena Plan’ is still in force, whilst the new government (SYRIZA) considers the introduction of ‘Athena Plan II’ as a further reform in higher education – the criteria and measures of which are unknown at the time of writing. In light of these, it is worth considering the potential impact of social work education on students’ anti-oppressive practice, and to what extent a higher education system, which reproduces inequalities (KANEP-GSEE, 2014), may have influenced it.

In relation to the content of the curricula, previous research on social work education in Greece has suggested that individualistic and uncritical approaches within the curriculum predominate (Ioakimidis, 2008; Papadaki and Papadaki, 2008; Teloni, 2011a; Teloni and Mantanika, 2015). Dedotsi et al. (2016) have observed that whilst some newer modules claim to provide a more

⁵An average salary of a contract academic is approximately £300 per month depending on given teaching hours and their qualifications. Permanent staff’s salaries have been reduced too but reach approximately £900-1000 per month (*The Guardian*, 20/06/2013).

structural approach with references to multicultural work, these do not necessarily elevate students' critical consciousness and adherence to professional (anti-oppressive) values. Yet, advancement for social work education is noted in the revised curriculum (2013) of the social work course route in the AEI, where a number of modules refer to human, civil and social rights; national and EU policies; critical social work as well as the current socio-economic crisis' effects on social care. Although very new, such advancement is very important step for social work education in Greece. However, in the light of the wider oppressive policies and the unjust higher education system, it is worth considering whether, how and why an anti-oppressive approach to social work education is actually prioritised.

Methodology

Sampling and data collection

Using a case study design (Yin, 1994), the study took place in one of the four national social work Departments in Greece (subsequently abolished) between March and July 2013. Semi-structured interviews were used with final year students (n=14) and academic staff (n=10) who taught on the programme at the time. This was part of a larger doctoral study carried out by a British Higher Education Institution and it received ethical approval both from the University's ethical review board and the Head of the Social Work Department, where the research took place.

The protection of the participants' interests has been a key consideration in this research, given the fragility of the employment position of staff and the potential for negative reactions by the university toward students' comments should these be critical. Considerable efforts were made to disguise the identity of those who participated whether from staff, fellow students or the department as a whole and in the reporting code numbers only are used to attribute direct quotations. Participants' informed consent was supported through a detailed information sheet and opportunities for clarification in person prior to the interview commencing as well as the requirement for written consent to participate. They also had the option to withdraw from the study at any point, including during the data analysis process.

Interviews lasted 45-50 minutes and were audio recorded. The interviews enabled the participants to discuss their reflections and comments on the content of social work education related to anti-oppressive practice as well as more generally their educational experiences as students or educators. Since AOP is a relatively new critical social work theory discussed in Greece, the interviews involved exploration with participants around their understanding of key concepts of anti-oppressive theory, such as social justice, that have shaped the global definition and practice of social work but may not have been labeled by participants as AOP theory per se.

Data analysis and interpretation

Data were transcribed verbatim and kept in the source language (Greek) for purposes of analysis. Data analysis was based on techniques like repeated sorting, coding and constant comparison that

characterise grounded theory. Pieces of text were highlighted, compared and contrasted with each other constantly in order to find consistencies (similar meanings, pattern matching) or differences among data. This approach is referred to as the constant comparison method of data analysis in grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Merriam, 1998). Themes were constructed then by placing similar data together. However, this was not just a simple grouping process; instead, it was an iterative dialogue where complex and inclusive categories emerged through constant comparison between data within each and across all interviews (Walker and Mylick, 2006). Examples of the process that the final themes emerged are presented below in Table 1:

Table 1: Summary table of process underpinning thematic structure of data analysis

| Initial Categories | Themes | Final Thematic Structure |
|---|------------------------------------|---|
| Limited curriculum reference to anti-oppressive concepts | Lack of anti-oppressive focus | Content of social work education <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Lack of anti-oppressive focus- Teaching strategies and approaches |
| Discussion for anti-oppressive concepts depending on educator’s initiative | | |
| Clinical and technical approach of ‘how to work’ | | |
| Experiential learning as approach to teaching | Teaching strategies and approaches | |
| Educators’ personal qualities | | |
| Inadequate national admission system | Wider educational policies | Context of social work education <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Wider (top –down) educational policies- Departmental policies and approaches |
| Disinvestment in social work education | | |
| Oppressive working conditions | | |
| Lack of resources for students and staff | | |
| Absent or ineffective policies-agreements with placement provider organisations | | |

| | | |
|--|---|--|
| <i>Lack of connection with the community</i> | <i>Departmental policies and approaches</i> | |
|--|---|--|

The theoretical insights of Foucault (1977, 1980, 1982) and Freire (1970, 1993, 1994) with respect to critical consciousness development and power were used to assist the interpretative process derived from the analysis. Both have argued that there are no final answers to meanings and explanations, but stress a need for constant critical reflection and deconstruction. Therefore, they have been used as *resources* to explore and understand social work education in Greece as well as to understand the findings.

Findings

The context of social work education

Both final year students and staff discussed the context of education, commenting on issues which stem from a top down model i.e. institutional policies from the top (Governmental policy) to down (the Department). They also remarked on aspects localised to the specific Department's adopted policy. Therefore, these findings encompass both macro and micro level concerns of these educational policies as discussed by participants.

Commenting on the top to down educational policies, academic staff members highlighted the student admission system which permits students to enter into a social work education programme accidentally (rather than deliberately) because they may be diverted to it if they do not get a place on their first choice degree. Five staff interviewees expressed concerns about the admission of 'inappropriate' students, for example some may not really want to study social work or even belong to/support fascist and neo-nazi groups. In the absence of relevant guidelines (whether institutional, national or professional), there are no means to prevent this from happening.

In addition, participants noted ineffective, economic-led educational policies which they regarded as resulting in the continuous disinvestment in (social work) education as one aspect amongst other austerity measures and policy cuts. They felt that this divestment had a significant impact on how education functions both at macro and micro level. Seven students and seven academics suggested that a major effect of this disinvestment was the gradual reduction in permanent staff (there were only two social work academics at the time of research) compared to previous years with the majority of academic staff in insecure contracts. Six academic staff members discussed of a division between permanent and contract staff in terms of payments and insurance, creating, thus, a two tier work force:

'as contract staff we are paid once per six or eight months, and we have also problems with insurance, we fight to get the minimum insurance...' (staff member 1) and

'you are not able to do research, to go on conferences, you are unpaid for months' (staff member 8).

It is observed that such an unequal treatment makes contract staff feel undervalued and less important. This is further revealed when staff member 9 described their treatment as *'working stiffs or slaves'*. In light of these reflections, it would appear that educators work within an oppressive environment which may impact also on the quality of education that students have. This impact was further revealed when participants described the high staff/student ratios in class as well as major difficulties in the organisation of the Department itself:

'we are forced to teach on workshops/seminars of 40, 50, 60 students⁶!' (staff member 4)

'The process of taking books, the semesters' registration and the announcements, i.e. for the examination content, were huge problems. If you were not at the premises you wouldn't know about the announcements – issue that would have been resolved if these were electronically published via internet' (student 7)

'there are complaints by students about not receiving their books/notes on time, having delayed lectures and so on. There is a climate of incoherence, and I do not think that the Department operates as appropriate like a higher educational institution' (staff member 3).

Separate from the concerns expressed about within institution teaching, there were further challenges in relation to practice education. Participants (seven staff members and seven students) emphasised the impact of a lack of any formalised agreements between the Department and placement provider organisations. They described vividly how students, service users, educators and placement provider organisations are mistreated because of inappropriate learning conditions resulting from over-crowded placements, lack of staff and what was described as *"an unofficial climate of begging"*:

'students, service users and professionals in placements are being treated like guinea pigs. 10-20 students are sent to a mental health community apartment and they outnumber the patients!' (staff member 7)

'in that placement we were 9 students. We didn't do anything than just sitting around and drinking coffee... It was a pointless placement' (student 2) and

'It is a great concession of education to beg colleagues, "please take 5 or 10 students", whilst they can take only 3. Education is not a charity/philanthropy with the poor students who need our help and mercy. No, it is in their rights to be educated and have an appropriate placement' (staff member 6).

Interviewees also discussed the limited available resources - as a result of the disinvestment in education - to assist in their educational practice despite working in a university. These resources

⁶ In the past, the required maximum number of attendants in such workshops/seminars (in Greek: *εργαστήρια*) by law was 20 students.

included access to academic journals, equipment such as computer, internet or projector, even physical conditions like heating and seats:

‘We have nothing on equipment... I was forced to ask students to bring laptops and speakers from their home...’ (staff member 9) and

‘the classrooms are very bad, with not enough seats and no desk, there is nowhere to seat properly like a human being’ (staff member 5).

What is evident from the findings of this section is that educators work and students study within a context of ineffective or absent policies, which reproduce further inequalities and oppression both at institutional and personal level. The functionality of education appears itself to reflect and reproduce oppressive power relations. However, it could be argued that were these conditions exposed and challenged, they would constitute a reflective learning opportunity for students about anti-oppressive practice. Nevertheless, there was no reference to any such a challenge by participants. Instead, a lack of connection with the community and reflection with the wider political context and events was highlighted, for example:

‘An education in the fishbowl, cut off from political incidents and social problems, can never prepare students (for anti-oppressive practice). For example, there is a violation of social rights in Greece by the state and social work departments haven’t done anything against this’ (staff member 8).

In a situation such as this, it is of note to wonder how social work education can prepare students to promote social change and social action when it appears to be sterilised and unable itself to challenge oppression. Yet, more revealing reflections were discussed on the content of social work education, as follows.

The content of social work education

Interviewees discussed a lot the curriculum of the Department, describing it as outdated, using bibliographies from the 1980s and unreflective of current social needs (seven staff members and seven students), for example:

‘it may have reflected the society’s needs 5-6 years ago, but things have changed a lot now; specific modules should be added or cut’ (staff member 4).

As a result of this, participants noted that a clinical and technical approach of ‘how to work’ predominates the curriculum with no emphasis on issues of ethics, social justice and anti-oppressive practice:

‘there is no reference on collective action or on ethics. It was shocking to have students in their final year, who didn’t know the code of ethics or where to look for it’ (staff member 9)

‘we learned about each minority, what services are available, what their needs are, etc.’ (student 5) and

‘the curriculum doesn’t reflect issues of difference, minorities, stereotypes and oppression. Even now after 20 years that migration issues are so pivotal within the Greek society, the curriculum may just refer to these in one module in a very general, vague and theoretical way. How are students going to work with these issues without even having been taught?’ (staff member 6).

Considering the comments on curriculum’s content, interviewee 6’s question is crucial. If education does not prioritise issues of social justice and ethics, how then might students do this themselves? Such an approach to education not only appears to not prepare students for anti-oppressive practice, but also students may not be aware of basic ethical issues. Whilst it was revealed that a few staff members take the initiative to include anti-oppressive and social justice issues in their teaching, it is observed that anti-oppressive education is a matter of chance; in other words dependent on the educator and whether they consider these as important.

Beyond the curriculum, there were also discussions about educators’ teaching strategies, revealing the importance of experiential learning through case scenarios and role playing (ten students and seven staff members). It was suggested that this approach to teaching is more efficient than giving a lecture. However, in light of the previous quotes about education’s lack of reference to anti-oppressive concepts and connection with the wider political and oppressive context, using experiential learning exercises on its own without discussing the structural roots of oppression, does not deepen students’ learning and development:

‘it is not enough. You cannot do some exercises about your stereotypes for immigrants or poverty only, without knowing the policy. Therefore, these exercises should be combined with theoretical explanations (of the roots of social problems and how they are perceived)’ (staff member 8).

Finally, interviewees (three staff members and five students) reflected on the personal qualities and personal (anti-oppressive) practice of the educators themselves. Key positive qualities mentioned were the educator having a genuine interest in getting closer with students and being available after class for further inquiries or personal issues. However, staff members and students also shared their observations of inappropriate approaches among educators. Such approaches were alleged to involve an improper (in) tolerance of students:

‘it is surprising that 40% of students are evaluated as ‘A’/excellent students by some staff. It is unacceptable to not fail the student who writes that “immigrants should leave Greece” in their assignment...On the other hand, I have seen colleagues to be judgemental towards students because of their appearance, for example their piercing...’ (staff member 4)

‘I think a lot of unethical things happen... Therefore, how can you expect students to be ethical when you (the educator) are not?’ (staff member 7) and

‘when I was in a placement we had...an ‘absent’ academic supervisor. We did only two supervision sessions – instead of thirteen - in the whole semester and everything was very

unclear. When we challenged this with her (the supervisor) – me and another person – we were the only ones who almost failed that placement...’ (student 4).

An explanation of such an approach, may be again related to the absence of relevant policies, clear obligations and expectations both by students and educators. What is more interesting though is that whilst such alleged behaviours and approaches have been witnessed by educators and students, it appears that these have remained unchallenged. How are students expected to challenge discrimination and oppression in whatever guise, when some educators themselves are silent towards unethical behaviours and attitudes?

As a summative note, reflections on the curriculum, practice placements and other educational processes revealed a lack of anti-oppressive and social justice focus. Instead, the individualistic emphasis driven by the neo-liberal logic of the wider educational policies appeared to permeate social work education. Yet, educators’ response to oppression and the Department was found to be a silent compromise and/or limited to individual initiatives. These observations question the ability of social work education to commit on its mission: to prepare ethical and anti-oppressive practitioners. However, how are these findings explained? How are the mechanisms of oppression revealed within the participants’ accounts? The next section explores these further.

Discussion and conclusions

Before we critically discuss the participants’ positions, it is important to briefly note here why combining Freire’s (1970, 1993, 1994) and Foucault’s (1977, 1980, 1982) insights in this research, is appropriate to interpreting the dynamics of social work education, both as an institution and pedagogy, with respect to our focus on anti-oppressive education and practice. Various controversies exist about locating Freire and Foucault in modernist or postmodernist/poststructuralist traditions. While this issue is beyond the scope of this paper, scholars (i.e. Giroux, 1993; McLaren, 1999; Morrow and Torres, 2002; Power, 2011) have argued that the works of Foucault and Freire have notions of both traditions; a position we too assume. Drawing both from critical social theory and the radical Left critique (Vinson, 1999), the common ground of the two thinkers can be found in their notions of power as being both repressive and enabling, their advocacy for critical reflection, their analysis of education as a social control institution, their understanding of reality as constantly changing, and their view of history as one of possibility. In addition, their different emphases – Foucault on power relations and Freire on praxis – can be viewed as complementary because of the limitations of each body of work. Finally, both reinforce an emancipatory and anti-oppressive practice (Hamilton and Sharma, 1997). Therefore, the following discussion will draw on both theoretical traditions and insights from a complementary perspective.

The research took place and captured a period of particular interest, the time of austerity and national socio-economic crisis (Matsaganis, 2012) within a highly oppressive context of unjust policies. Whilst an anti-oppressive practice would seem the profession’s ultimate response, social work education neither appears to stimulate students’ critical consciousness nor to engage

in praxis against oppression. However, this results in part from various underlying mechanisms of the wider (educational) context.

The concept of *discipline* as discussed earlier, describes the way in which power and dominant discourses are governed through institutions, such as universities, producing ‘docile’ subjects who do not challenge the dominant norms (Foucault, 1980, 1982; Freire, 1993). Cudd (2006) argued that oppression in institutions (education) lies in the injustices and unequal treatment of individuals. This is one of the main findings of this study too: students, educators, even service users are all subjected to an unequal and unjust system in the how of teaching, the operation of the Department and the neo-liberal educational policies. The university’s functionalities, also called the hidden curriculum (Tsang, 2011), were found to involve inappropriate micro-policies and educators’ lack of anti-oppressive practice, as observed in their failure not only to challenge alleged inappropriate/unethical practices and inconsistencies, but also to respond collectively to the identified gaps of education. Similar observations on inappropriate policies and placements have been reported within literature (Clifford and Royce, 2008; Collins and Wilkie, 2010; Cox and Hirst, 1995; Wilson, 2013) and students’ emancipatory practice is questioned. Yet, further inequalities and injustices were found to stem from the wider neo-liberal educational policies within which social work education is formally organised.

The description of the market-driven context within which higher education operates in Greece has similarities with the downsizing practices that prevail in the welfare and higher education arena across the Western context (Preston and Aslett, 2014; Wilson and Campbell, 2013; Ying Yee and Wagner, 2013). These oppressive policies within which social work education operates, have led to a demoralised (Ferguson and Woodward, 2009) or depoliticised (Giroux, 2010) learning environment. Yet, this learning environment can be ‘transformative’ based on the libertarian education of Freire (1993) by raising students’ critical consciousness –exposing and taking action against the oppressive reality.

However, the findings of this study reflect that such an approach was not prioritised in this case. The absence of an anti-oppressive focus of the content of social work education was evidenced both in final year students and academic staff accounts. Instead, a technical and individualistic approach focusing on the acquisition of skills of ‘how to work’ predominate the curriculum. Yet, uncritical approaches within the social work curricula have been identified both in the Greek context (Ioakimidis, 2008; Papadaki and Papadaki, 2008; Teloni, 2011a; Teloni and Mantanika, 2015) and the Western context where the widely debated competence-based practice (CBP) and evidence-based practice (EBP) approaches (Edmond et al., 2006; Gambrill, 2007) prevail. Despite the importance of obtaining technical skills, the sacrifice of social justice and anti-oppressive issues discourage critical consciousness and neutralise practice (Gray and Gibbons, 2007; Morley, 2008).

It is therefore questionable as to whether social work students can perceive themselves as ‘ethical and political beings’ (Freire 1989, in Moch, 2009: 94) as their (anti-) oppressive practice is

produced within a network of power relations between the *discipline of their education* (non-prioritisation of social justice and anti-oppressive content; unjust and unequal context of the Department driven by the market-driven policies by the state), the *structure of the social work profession* in Greece (low status, uncritical approaches of the profession) and a *wider oppressive discourse* (violation of human rights, oppressive austerity measures, rise of fascism).

It needs to be acknowledged that this study's findings refer to one Department of Social Work in Greece (the research's case), at a specific time of period (spring 2013) and they cannot be generalised for the whole social work education in Greece, whether at that time or subsequently. However, this is the first time that research of this kind has been conducted in Greece and it is valuable as it can initiate further debate and dialogue about social work education, not only at a national level but in other countries too, especially those experiencing serious financial and political crises. Flyvbjerg (2006) suggests that such generalisation is the result of the force of example – the rich understandings based on detailed descriptions interpreted in the particular context.

Implications for social work education

Freire (1993: 25) protested resistance to the 'neo-liberal fatalism' and anti-oppressive praxis through an existential, libertarian, dialogical education. Therefore, in the context of Greece today, such an education cannot but reflect and respond to current social needs and it should be redefined and restructured continuously. Building on the works of Foucault and Freire, social work students can be engaged in a critical and political analysis about their self and the policies of institutions in which they are situated. Such an education though needs also to be dialogical and reflexive, with the active participation of students and service users in designing and evaluating educational content and processes (Mackay, Fairclough, and Coull, 2009; Robinson and Webber, 2013).

In addition, a genuine anti-oppressive education cannot be sterilised from social action. This can be achieved via collective participation of students and academics against austerity policies, violation of human rights, and through social movements and professional associations. Social Work Departments can play a key role here via connecting with wider political demands for social justice and redistribution of resources.

However, in Freire's view, the decision to engage in anti-oppressive praxis and see oneself as a history maker demands maximum political wisdom (1970) via a deliberate engagement in self-deconstruction/reconstruction. Therefore, we need to critically reflect on our role in wider policies and political contexts and question ourselves: in times of oppression whose side are we on and what position do we take?

Taking the insights of anti-oppressive theory to a new context – Greece, this research has demonstrated that (anti-) oppressive praxis is (re)produced within a matrix of complex and interrelated historical, cultural, socio-economic and political processes. Without this

consciousness – *context related* – anti-oppressive theory will only remain a top down, apolitical ‘knowledge’ as its sceptics protest (i.e. McLaughlin, 2005; Wilson and Beresford, 2000). In addition, such consciousness calls for a reconceptualisation of the very definition of AOP as a *process*, which reflects the constant transforming dynamics of the emerging social needs and unequal social relations in a given context. However, anti-oppressive praxis is not assumed to be limited to the simple rejection of unjust and oppressive discourses. It involves *action* for an alternative discourse based on solidarity and social justice. In times of crisis, social work education – not only in Greece, but internationally – can be a crucial part of shaping such an anti-oppressive and emancipatory alternative discourse against neo-liberalism, injustice and oppression.

Addendum

At the time of writing this paper, further developments in social work education are taking place. First, in September 2017 the Department of Social Work that was abolished under the ‘Athena Plan’ in 2013, was re-opened and this is a very positive step. However, at the same time it was announced that the Department of Social Work in the Technological Educational Institute (TEI) of Athens will be merged and blended with other educational of tangential relevance to social work (public health, community health and primary education). These developments evidence once again how social work education and the profession itself may be politically driven to be marginalized or even controlled by top-down and market-driven standards. Academics, students and practitioners in Greece continue to resist these recent announcements whilst the action for an alternative discourse in practice and education according to the values of the profession internationally seems more urgent than ever.

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